

*Born Again*  
John 3:1-8, CEB  
January 14, 2024  
Pastor Sarah Wiles

1 There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” 3 Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.” 4 Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?” 5 Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. 6 Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ 8 God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

...

I love Nicodemus. Over the course of the gospel we get to see him grow into a devoted follower. But this is his first encounter with Jesus, and it’s amazing he came back, because Jesus isn’t exactly... clear.

Jesus tells him you need to be born anew, or as it’s more frequently put, born again. The Greek even leaves open the possibility of it meaning born from above. It’s a whole other temporal and spatial realm. No wonder Nicodemus was confused.

One of my New Testament professors always warned us that the hardest part about reading the New Testament is actually reading it. In other words, we’re often so sure we know what it says and what it means, that we skip past things without a second look.

Like being born again. All of us in 21<sup>st</sup> century America know exactly what that means: It means a singular, life-changing moment of conversion that ensures eternal salvation. It may involve coming forward during worship, or praying a particular prayer, or baptism, but we all know what it means—we think.

Some of us in this room have had that specific experience. Some of us haven’t. As a child in the Southern Baptist church I longed for the moment when I too would rise and walk to the front, beckoned by the sweet strains of Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me. But it never came. I just grew over time. The faith of my parents gradually became my faith, but I can’t tell you an hour or a day. I know that among those of us who can tell you an hour and a day, there are a whole host of feelings about it. The experience may have been profoundly good, changing the whole trajectory of a life. Or, in hindsight, it may feel like it was performative—going forward because you thought you should, or that it was a manipulated moment in some way.

Nicodemus wasn’t wrong. Being born again is complicated. It wasn’t complicated for him in exactly the ways it’s complicated for us, but it was still an awfully abstract idea.

But come back to the metaphor of being born again, born anew.

What is birth like? It’s a process. It takes some time. We call it labor. The core movement is a tension between contraction and expansion, like breathing, but, um, more. It’s always messy. There’s often pain. Sometimes it feels like dying. Sometimes death really is part of it. It’s better not to do it alone. It changes you. Is this what life with God is like?

Or how about actually being born? What's that like? None of us can really remember, but we can tell it's not a conscious act of will to be born. It doesn't look comfortable. If anything, it looks like an experience of disorienting, dislocating movement toward an unknown end.

Is Jesus saying if we want to see and know and be closer to the Sacred, it's going to be something like being born?

It's worth noticing that this is a feminine metaphor. The spiritual journey is one of being born again. The Spirit is giving birth to us. It's labor. It requires patience. There will be discomfort. It's mostly out of our control. Our task is to let ourselves be pushed along into new life.

Because that's what's waiting for us. When we're born like this, by the Spirit, we're born into new life, real life, eternal life, life that's not defined by all the forces and forms of death.

We are born into life, and our task is to trust it. That's what belief is: trust. From the moment of birth, the task is trust. Trust this new, bright world. Trust the arms that hold you, the people who feed you, the breath that breathes on you and in you.

This is the core movement of the spiritual life: to be born and to trust, to trust that we do not need to be afraid.

It's hard to lean into this kind of trust. It's particularly hard when it seems like the world is falling apart. It's hard to trust if you're worried that you might lose your health insurance if you lose your job, or that you might outlive your savings. It's hard to trust there will be enough when those student loans are looming, not to mention just next week's deadlines. It's hard to trust when you're waiting on the test results, or you're not sure if your marriage is going to make it, or your child. Those things are real.

Jesus says: focus on being born, trust and you will find true life. Is that wishful thinking? Avoidance? Escapism?

I don't think so. The world is always falling apart. It was surely falling apart for Jesus and the colonized, impoverished people with whom he spent his days. Then one night a man, not unlike us, came to Jesus and said, where do I start?

Jesus said: if you want a different way, you have to be born again. Born of the Spirit, that blows where it will, and doesn't operate by the logic or economy of the world. Be born again, and let your life be shaped by trust in the Spirit.

That trust, which some call belief and some call faith, that trust in a life that is not defined by death, this trust saves us. It sets us free. It's what gives followers of Jesus the courage to take risks, to let go of the stuff that we think is going to save us, to live in a profoundly different way. Living with hope, with courage, with a willingness to risk for love—that is spiritual work. It's trust. It's faith. It's nothing less than being born again.

Nicodemus left that night, still confused, but the birth pangs were beginning. He would never be the same. The labor had begun.

So, I wonder, what is being born in you?

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024